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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR IN SRI LANKA'S EAST: DISARM PARAMILITARY GROUPS
BEFORE ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

11. Ambassador and AID officer visited Batticaloa in Sri Lanka's volatile Eastern Province on January 22-24 to attend the opening of a vocational training center funded by private American donations; open two USAID funded facilities; and meet with local officials, donors, and INGO representatives. In public and private remarks during the visit, the Ambassador called on the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) to ensure free and fair elections, particularly by disarming any group that might use force to intimidate candidates or voters. The elections, which will be held in nine local councils formerly under control of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), will be the first in these areas since 1994. The Ambassador subsequently met with Defense Secretary Rajapaksa to brief him on the growing lawlessness in Batticaloa, the concern there about the increasing potential for pre-election violence, the need for the GSL to assert control over law and order and prevent the paramilitaries from threatening and intimidating election candidates, and the potential for the GSL to demobilize paramilitaries by offering them vocational training, preferably away from Batticaloa. End Summary.

COMPETE WITH WORDS, NOT BULLETS

¶ 12. The Ambassador was the guest of honor at the opening of the Marvell Sarvodaya Vocational Training Center in Batticaloa, whose construction was funded by the charity Give2Asia with donations from private Americans and US companies. The center will provide 3-6 month courses in a broad range of vocational subjects. Given the location of the event, and its timing during nominations week, some speakers spoke about the broader development context and upcoming elections. During his speech, the Ambassador called for free and fair elections without intimidation by any armed groups. Subsequent feedback from a wide range Sri Lankans and foreigners alike confirmed how much people appreciated his message. The Ambassador also expressed his strong support for vocational training as a way to improve the lives of people in the East. Although the USG did not fund this center, vocational training is a key component of USG support in tsunami- and conflict-affected areas of eastern Sri Lanka. USAID has funded the construction of more than a dozen vocational training centers in the east and south since 2005, and will continue to support vocational training in the east under a new program that will begin in early 2008.

MIXED VIEWS ON LOCAL ELECTIONS IN EAST

¶ 13. The upcoming local council elections in Batticaloa, expected in early March, were a main topic on many people's minds. During a one-week nominating period that ended January 25, five parties and 17 "independent groups" put forward candidates, suggesting wide participation. However, several parties chose not to participate, and many of our interlocutors pointed to fears about personal safety as the reason why. While some people thought elections under any

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circumstances would be a positive step, many questioned the wisdom of holding them at this juncture, particularly given that many political parties double as armed militant groups. According to one interlocutor, articulating a common concern: "Everyone is afraid. No one wants to compete. There will be many killings." Muslim political leaders expressed concern that their participation would give credibility to what might become an unfair election, but said they were planning nonetheless to participate in five of the nine divisions where there are Muslim constituents. An American Jesuit who has lived in Batticaloa for sixty years said "we neither want the election nor are we ready for it," because the presence of armed political parties will prevent the election from being fair. UN representatives also expressed doubts about the elections, which one suggested were being forced on the East by the GSL in Colombo.

LAWLESSNESS, VIOLENCE THREATEN
RECONCILIATION AND ELECTIONS

¶ 14. Lack of personal security and lawlessness remain the primary concerns of most in the East. In addition to undermining the validity of elections, these factors continue to hinder reconciliation and a return to normalcy. The LTTE-breakaway Tamil Makkal Vidudilai Pulihel (TMVP) group, as a perpetrator and target for violence, continues to be a principal source of this insecurity. There has been widespread looting by non-uniformed armed men in Batticaloa with private homes, government offices and donor warehouses the primary targets. A UN representative said that shelter materials worth 21 million rupees (\$194,444) had been stolen over the past six months. One local government official suggested low-level TMVP members were colluding with GSL security forces in carrying out the burglaries. The continued presence of the TMVP as an armed group - and the GSL's unwillingness to rein them in - has worsened the atmosphere of impunity and opened the door for other armed groups to threaten, rob, and kidnap. One government representative acknowledged "indiscipline," especially drunkenness, among police, and he said the GSL planned to bring in 4,000 additional police to Batticaloa District to address security problems. However, without a more professional police force - including one which includes Tamil speakers - merely increasing the size of the force is unlikely to increase trust on the part of the

overwhelmingly Tamil-speaking citizens of Batticaloa District.

ELECTION BY THE GUN

¶15. There has already been violence leading up to the March elections, and most people we spoke to expect things to get worse. Recognizing its limited popular appeal, the TMVP is reportedly resorting to violence to compel people, including Muslims, to run under its banner. Some Muslim politicians accused the GSL of using armed boys in some villages to intimidate candidates from running against the ruling party. Many acknowledge that the TMVP is itself under threat due to limited reinfiltration in the East by the LTTE, which is confirmed by recent killings of TMVP cadres. Additional police protection, suggested by the two Muslim political leaders we met as a way to allow campaigning without arms, is unlikely to work

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given the TMVP's distrust of the police.

MUSLIMS CONCERNED ABOUT LAND AND SECURITY

¶16. Land and security are at the top of the agenda for Muslims, according to representatives of the Muslim Peace Council of Kattankudy and two prominent leaders from the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) whom the Ambassador met. An SLMC representative claimed that since 1990 the LTTE had forcibly expropriated nearly 30,000 acres of land titled to Muslims in Batticaloa District alone. This represents half the total acreage to which Muslims have lost access during the war, according to a 2003 USAID-funded survey. Despite the central importance of the land issue, the more immediate problem for Muslims remains security, both for the elections and in general. Sectarian violence in the region, which has ebbed and flowed since 1990, is on the rise again, with the TMVP's advent contributing to escalating tensions. In a recent incident, five Muslims were shot and injured after Friday prayers. This was followed by TMVP allegations that Muslims slaughtered a cow at a Hindu temple. Although Muslim leaders subsequently went to the temple to clean up the slaughter, suggesting political will for coexistence and reconciliation, local government representatives said deteriorating Muslim-Tamil relations plays into the hands of the GSL's divide-and-rule strategy in the region.

OPPORTUNITY MAY BE LOST IF MORE
RESOURCES ARE NOT INVESTED

¶17. Meetings with UN and local government representatives underscore the tremendous investment that is needed in the East just to provide basic needs such as potable water, transportation, and policing. Without rapid progress in these and other areas, the GSL will have a hard time convincing people in the Batticaloa District and in the East more broadly that the GSL is willing and able to provide a better life for people in the east. The Ambassador visited several public buildings that USAID has rebuilt, including an English-language learning center, the central produce and fish market of Batticaloa town, and the Batticaloa lighthouse. All three of these represent livelihoods investments that Batticaloa residents have needed for decades. Chronic poor maintenance reflects the decades-long underinvestment and neglect of the Eastern Province's citizens and public infrastructure, principally due to the conflict, which was compounded by tsunami damage. In addition to improving security, the GSL will have to rapidly improve this infrastructure if it is to prove to the people in the East that they have a brighter future now that their province is fully under Government control. These are just a few examples of confidence building measures are critical to stabilizing the East.

COMMENT

¶8. While the GSL largely cleared the East of the LTTE in July 2007, it remains to be seen whether the Government is prepared to support

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recovery and improve security, governance, and economic prospects for Sri Lankans in the province. Given the slow pace of public investment in the region's three districts, and ongoing concerns about security, people in the East have gained few tangible benefits from their "liberation". Local elections in March, if conducted freely and fairly, will be a further opportunity for the GSL to restore faith among people in Batticaloa District. Elections marred by violence and other improprieties, however, will further discredit the GSL, while having the effect of slowing recovery, reconciliation, and development in the East. End Comment.

FOLLOW-UP

¶9. The Ambassador met on January 25 with Defense Secretary Rajapaksa to brief him on the Embassy's conclusions and advice. Ambassador highlighted the growing lawlessness in Batticaloa, the growing number of extra-judicial killings that now occur on almost a daily basis and are widely believed to be the work of shadowy groups armed by GSL military intelligence, and the concern there about the increasing potential for pre-election violence. He urged that the GSL assert control over law and order and prevent the paramilitaries from threatening and intimidating election candidates. He also underscored the potential for the GSL to demobilize paramilitaries by offering them vocational training, preferably away from Batticaloa. The Secretary thanked the Ambassador for his briefing and acknowledged the GSL needs to do more to assert control over law and order in the East.

BLAKE